

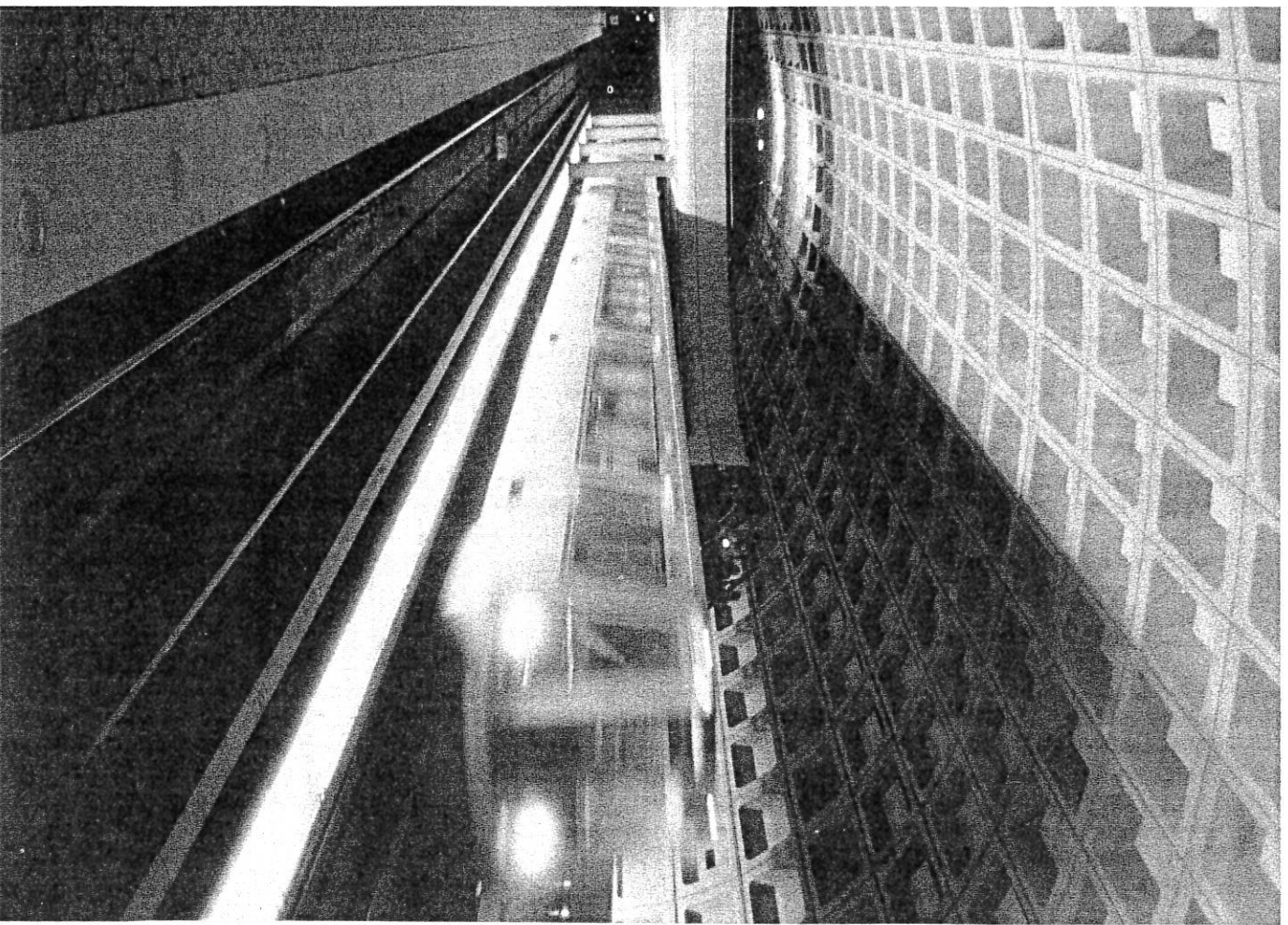
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AN ORANGE LINE TRAIN TO BALLSTON

The first time Marvela "Velle" Watkins saw the man with the dreadlocks, rain threatened and she just managed to get herself and her three children down into the subway before it began. The rain was waiting for them at the end of their trip. On the crowded Stadium-Armory subway platform, she held Avis, the baby, by the hand, lest the girl wander off, and Marvin, the oldest, stood on his mother's other side. Marvin was looking into the tunnel out of which the train would come. He held his bookbag under one arm and looked down at the lights that were flush with the floor and whose blinking would indicate the approach of the train.

"How do the lights know when the train is comin'?" he asked his mother.

This was a new question. "I don't know," she said. "Avis, stop kicking like that." The girl continued to kick out at something imaginary in front of her and Marvela tugged at her arm until the girl stopped. "I guess," she said to Marvin, "that way down the line the moving train hits something on the tracks and that tells the lights ahead to start blinking."



Marvin seemed satisfied with the answer. He studied the lights and as he did they began to blink. The boy was nine. My son the engineer, his mother thought.

On the other side of Avis stood Marcus, her second son. Marvella noted out of the corner of her eye that he was yapping away, as usual, and at first Marvella thought he was talking to Avis or having another conversation with himself. "Everybody else is borin," he said to her the first time she asked why he talked to himself. He was now seven. Long before the train came into view, it sent ahead a roar, which always made Marvella look left and right to make certain her children were safe and close. And when she turned away from the coming train, she saw that Marcus had been talking to the man with the dreadlocks.

Marcus and Avis managed to find seats just in front of their mother, and she was surprised when the dreadlock man sat down beside her. Marvin found a seat on the aisle across from his siblings. Beside the boy was a woman as old as Marvella's mother, asleep, her head leaning against the window. For a few seconds Marvin looked at the old woman, then he opened his bookbag and took out a piece of paper.

The subway man running the train announced through the speakers in the ceiling that this was an orange line train to Ballston.

Marcus, after sitting for a few seconds or so, turned around and knelt in his seat, facing the man with the dreadlocks. Being so small, he hadn't been able to get a good look at the dreadlocks while he stood beside the man on the platform, but now he was closer and more or less head-to-head with the man and he planned to take advantage of the situation. I should tell him to turn around, his mother thought, but this might be one time when he's justified. Avis, a head or so shorter than Marcus, followed her brother's example and was staring at the man as well. A minute or so won't hurt, Marvella thought.

"Why you got your hair like that?" Marcus asked the man.

"You don't have no comb or nothin?" Avis asked him. "My mama wouldn't do my hair like that." Avis was four and on any given day had a different answer about whether she liked the idea of going to school next year.

"Oh, yeah," the man said, "I got all the combs and brushes I need."

"Then why you do your hair like that?" Marcus said.

The train stopped and more people entered the car. The subway man told the new people what train they had entered.

The dreadlock man said, "It's nice like this. It makes me feel good to wear it like this."

"Oh," Marcus said.

"Oh," Avis said. Then she looked the man up and down and said, "Don't you want a haircut? My mama take my brothas to the barbashop. She can take you to the barbashop too."

The man laughed. Marvella had been surprised that he did not have a West Indian accent. Each lock of his hair was at least a foot long and there were at least twenty locks with perhaps the roundness of a nickel. Around each lock, about an inch up from the end, there was a band, and each band was a different, dark color. The man smelled like the incense street vendors sold.

"No," the man said. "No barbershops for me. I like it like this."

The train stopped again. "Good mornin. This is an orange line to Ballston," the subway man said.

Now there were people standing in the aisle and Marvella could not see Marvin.

"You look like a man I saw in a scary movie one time," Marcus said.

"Marcus, turn round!"

"It's okay," the dreadlock man said, and with one finger he momentarily touched Marvella's hand. "You like scary movies?" he said to Marcus.

"Yeah," the boy said. "But my mama don't let me watch em. Me and Marvin snuck and saw one at Granny's when she was sleepin."

"They give you nightmares," the man said.

"Hey!" Marcus said, his eyes opening wide. "Thas what my granny said."

The train stopped again, and though it did not stop any more suddenly than before, Avis lost her balance and began to fall back. The man reached across and caught her arm, in a move that seemed

almost as if it had been planned, as if he had known two stops or so back that the child would begin to fall at that moment. Marvella thought: If I see him tomorrow, it will be a good sign.

"Now see," she said. "Both of you turn around, and I mean it."

At the McPherson Square stop, Marvella and her children got off. Marcus and Avis told the man good-bye and he said that it was nice meeting them. It was raining when they came out of the subway. With the rain, it was hard going across 14th Street and through Franklin Square Park to 13th Street. Marvella carried Avis in one arm and held the umbrella with the other hand. She had Marcus carry her pocketbook and he and Marvin shared an umbrella. Up the street from K on 13th, they went through the wide alley leading to Thompson School on 12th Street, where she and Avis watched the boys run up the stairs and go inside. Her arms were tired and she put Avis down. She wrapped the strap of her pocketbook around her shoulder and held her daughter's hand as they made their way two blocks up 12th Street to Horizon House, where Marvella's mother lived. They took the elevator up to her mother's apartment, and in a minute or so Marvella was heading back down 12th Street to the C&P Telephone Company, where she was a service representative.

It was about eight thirty in the morning. She saw her day as blocks of time. She entered the building at 12th and H, and the second block began.

They did see the man with the dreadlocks the next day, the Friday before Washington's Birthday, but Marvella had forgotten that it was supposed to be a good sign. He sat across the aisle from the boys, and she and Avis shared the seat just in back of the one the boys were sharing. That morning, perhaps because of the holiday weekend, there were fewer people.

"You back, huh?" Marcus said to the man. "Still got the same hair, too."

"Yep, it's me," the man said. "How're you doing today?"

"Fine. No school tomorrow and we goin to the zoo if the weather good."

Avis, interested, leaned across her mother's lap. "You can't come to the zoo with us."

"Why not?" the man said.

"Cause my granny's comin and she wants to give peanuts to the monkey-sec, monkey-do."

"My granny always says there ain't no good men left in the world," Marcus said.

"Marcus . . ." his mother said.

"Well, if that's so," the man said, "it wouldn't be a good thing for the world."

Marcus hunched his shoulders, as if it didn't matter to him one way or another. "You goin to work?" Marcus said to the man.

"Yep," the man said.

"They let you come to work with your hair like that?" Marcus said.

"Marcus," his mother said.

The man said to her, "You have wonderful kids." She told him thank you. Then to Marcus, the man said, "Yeah, I go to work like this. They have to let me. They have no choice. I'm the best they have."

"If they don't let you come to work, you gon beat em up?" Marcus said. Marvin had his head to the window, looking out into the darkness of the tunnel, his hands shading his eyes.

The train stopped and the subway woman announced that it was an orange line train to Ballston. Marvella and her children always got on at the Stadium-Armory stop in Southeast. It did not matter if they took the orange line, which ended at Ballston, or the blue line, which ended at National Airport, because both lines, traveling over the same tracks, went past their McPherson Square stop.

"No need to beat em up," the dreadlock man said. "You go to school?" he said to Avis.

"I ain't neva goin to school," and she shook her head vigorously. "No way. No way. No way."

"I go," Marcus said. "It ain't bad." He leaned his head out into the aisle and moved it up and down as if he were watching a bouncing ball. When he looked back up at the man, he pointed at the hair and asked, "Whatcha call that kinda hair?"

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"We call them dreadlocks."

"You sure you whartn't in that movie I saw? They had this man comin out of the ground and everything. He was dead but he was still alive and nobody could kill him." He turned to his brother. "Marvin, don't he look like that man in that movie we saw at Gran-ny's? You member?"

The train stopped again. Marvin turned from the window and considered the man for a long time. The man smiled, but Marvin did not seem impressed with him or his hair and the boy did not return the smile. "You ask people too many questions," he said to his brother and turned back to the window.

My son the old man, his mother thought. The train had just passed the Smithsonian stop and, knowing that the trip was about to end, she found that she wanted the man to ask her something, anything, before they got off. She would have settled for something asinine as what was her sign, even though she hated such questions. And though she told the world that she did not believe in it all that much, she had nevertheless learned that she was not compatible with Capricorns and Libras. Her ex-husband was a Capricorn. If she had to guess, she would have said the man with the dreadlocks was an Aries. But the last man she had slept with, three months ago, had been an Aries, a man she had met at a club she and her sister went to. The man at the club had been full of shit and she was glad that her children had never met him. "They call me Slide," the guy had introduced himself. "Short for Electric Slide."

It occurred to her as she and the children were crossing Franklin Square that the dreadlock man's finger touch the day before had been the first time a man had touched her—outside of handshakes with men at work—since the doofus she met at the club.

They did not see the man at all the next week, and she hated herself for having thought about him over the holiday weekend. Going home that Friday after not seeing him all that week, she began to think that maybe it had something to do with the fact that they had taken the blue line for at least three mornings that week. Maybe, she thought, he only went on the orange line.

The following week she managed to get the kids out the door and

down to the subway platform at about the same time when she thought they had met the man the first week. On Monday and Tuesday she waited and looked about for him, then, because time was running out, she settled for a blue line.

"I thought you said it didn't matter if we took a blue or an orange line," Marvin said after they were scared.

"Well, it doesn't matter," his mother said.

"Then why we wait while all those trains went by?"

My son the lawyer. "I don't know," she said. That was the only answer in life that ever seemed to shut him up.

"Hey, it's that man with the snake hair," Marcus said, spotting the man and waving to him. It was Wednesday and they were on the subway platform. The man came over and appeared genuinely glad to see them. She was happy to see him, but she was also upset that he had not been there on the other mornings. She had in her bag a slip of paper with her name and work and home telephone numbers in case he asked.

"Morrin," the subway woman said after they entered the train. She sounded as if the last thing in the world she wanted to do was speak. "Orange line . . . Ballston . . ."

"Where's Boston?" Avis asked the man, yawning. She was in her mother's lap and the man sat beside them. The boys were in the seat ahead of them, and again Marcus was kneeling facing them.

"It's Ballston," the man enunciated. "The end of the line. It's across the river. In a place called Virginia."

"A long way," the little girl said and yawned again. She closed her eyes and leaned back against her mother.

"Kinda. It depends," the man said.

"What's in the bag?" Marcus said to the man.

Avis's eyes popped open and she sat up straight. "What's in the bag?" she said.

"None of your business," Marvella said to both children. "And turn around in that seat, Marcus." The boy looked at the man as if for help from his mother's order. Marvin was writing a letter to his father. The movement of the subway took his words sloppily above and below the lines, but he did not seem to care.

"My lunch," the dreadlock man said. He opened the bag and took out an apple and held it before the girl. "What's that?" he asked her.

"A apple," Marcus said. "Anybody know that."

"He ast me," Avis said. "Mama, tell Marcus to stop."

"Thas all you got for lunch?" Marcus said. "Boy, you pretty cheap."

The man put the apple back. "No, I have a sandwich and a slice of cheese."

"I hate cheese," Avis said. "It taste nasty."

"Well, I love cheese," Marcus said. "I could eat it all day long."

They saw him again on Friday and he was wearing a tie without a coat, carrying the same type of lunch bag. Marvella carried the same slip of paper, but the man with the dreadlocks did nothing but banter with Marcus and Avis.

On Saturday morning, on the pretense that they would go exploring before their father picked the children up, she borrowed her nephew's car and went driving about the neighborhood. She had grown up in Southeast, but she had spent much of her married life in Northwest, where she and the children had lived before they moved that summer to Southeast to share a large house with her sister and her two children. By keeping the boys at Thompson School in Northwest two blocks from her mother, she worried less when the school day ended.

Turning on the car's engine, she realized how she must look—on a beautiful day, she was dragging her kids along to look for a man she did not know, whom she could well come across strolling hand-in-hand with some other woman, who would probably also be arrayed in dreadlocks. She drove along an area bounded by 19th Street, Potomac, Kentucky, and North Carolina avenues, a very wide area that he would surely have to live in if he got on the subway at Stadium-Armory. In case the children asked what they were doing, she made up enough lies along the way for God to send her straight to hell, but surprisingly, there was nothing said, except for Marvin's comment that being so far from home, they might miss their father when he arrived. But, as if to punish her, God did not produce the dreadlock man.

Over the next several weeks she saw the dreadlock man only four or five times, and on most mornings she simply took whatever train came first. The deeper they went into the year, the less she saw of him. But now and again, she would wake with one of the kids screaming for this or that, and she would take herself and them off to the subway determined to wait for him, for an orange line train. When she did see him, she was glad that Marcus and Avis engaged him in conversation and not once did she tell them to turn around or stop bothering the man.

"How do the lights know to turn off when the train's gone?" Marvin asked her one Thursday morning not long before Memorial Day. His father had turned down the boy's request to live with him and his girlfriend across the Maryland line in Capitol Heights. Marvella was surprised, and relieved, that Marvin had let the matter drop the same day his father said no.

Marvella had been distracted and she asked him to repeat the question.

"None a your business," Avis said to Marvin.

"I wasn't even talkin to you," Marvin said to his sister. "You want a fat lip?"

"All right, stop it. Both of you, and I mean it!"

Marvin asked her again.

She tried to think of something that would satisfy him. "I guess the last car of the train hits a switch that tells the lights it's gone and the lights turn themselves off."

The lights blinked, and a blue line train came without them getting on. Marvin wanted to know why and Marvella told him to be quiet, for a few people were staring at them. Marvin quieted after they got on the next train, an orange line. The subway was packed and at their stop they had to fight their way to the exit. "Hey! Hey!" Marcus hollered. "Lettus outta this joint!"

As they went up the first set of escalators at McPherson Square, Marvin began asking again why they had to all the time wait when the blue train was like the orange. Just in front of the farecard machines, Marvella put down Avis and grabbed Marvin by the arm.

She pulled him along to a corner, away from the passing people. Marcus and Avis followed silently.

"I'm the boss around here, and you seem to be forgetting that," she said to him. He was utterly surprised and began to shake. "Who's the boss around here, you or me? Who? Who? Who's the mama in charge around here?"

His eyes filled with tears. "You are," he said, but not loud enough for her.

She did not like scenes like this, particularly around white people, who believed that nothing good ever happened between black people and their children, but she could not stop herself. "Who's the mama in charge around here, I said?" she kept asking the boy.

"You are," he said louder, crying. "You the mama. You the mama. You the mama in charge."

"Mama's the one in charge. Mama's the one in charge," Marcus chanted as they made their way across Franklin Square Park.

"Marcus, shut up!" his mother said just as Avis was about to take up the chant.

After that, she did not ever again see the man with the dreadlocks and she did not look for him anymore. But for some time, as she went about her days with their blocks of time, she would find herself comparing his hair with other dreadlocks she saw. By then the subway people had extended the orange line all the way to Vienna.